

**GENERAL SYNOD 2008**

**CHURCH IN SOCIETY REPORT**

**Proposed by Revd Kenny Hall (Diocese of Armagh)**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Your Grace, Hon Secretaries, Members of Synod,

I start with a question.

**In view of the current trend of secularism seemingly in control of popular opinion, what then is the role of the church in society?**

The church must revisit the oft repeated Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 and its consequence of Acts 1:8. St. Matthew records that the church should teach all that Jesus had commanded. This carries the overt implication that the teachers would be obeying those very commands. Our faith is not only intended for instruction, it should have a performative dimension- we should act differently as a consequence of it. Obeying Jesus' words will strengthen the church in the rest of the commission to go and make disciples. The role of the church in society starts closest to home and moves outward (Acts 1:8).

**Is there concern that the church's voice is being drowned out by alternate influences such as the secularising voices in society?**

We can change that by hearing the voice of the needy in our own congregations. The Church in Society works to enable the church's effective contribution to community, economic and social transformation, so that the full potential of all communities may be

realised. Transformation is about recognising the hope and possibilities that come through dreaming dreams, struggling through difficult dilemmas, taking action, and celebrating the steps taken, however small they may be. That's what our work entails - taking effective steps to address needs in society today!

**So what needs did The Church in Society Committee address this past year? Quite a lot in fact!** Now I don't intend to re-read our report of the year to you - you can find in on pages 239-262 of *The Book of Reports*. However there are a few issues that I deem necessary to highlight:

**1) Suicide.**

Some people who end their lives or attempt suicide might be trying to escape feelings of rejection, hurt, or loss. Others might be angry, ashamed, or guilty about something. Some people may be worried about disappointing friends or family members. And some may feel unwanted, unloved, victimized, or a burden to others. We all feel overwhelmed by difficult emotions or situations sometimes. But most people get through it or can put their problems in perspective and find a way to carry on with determination and hope. So why does one person look to suicide when another person in the same tough situation does not? What makes some people lose hope, while others pull through? What makes a person unable to see another way out of a bad situation besides ending his or her life? There are many unanswered questions, but the fact that people who would resort to suicide need help, and they need a listening ear!

The majority of suicides are among our young people. So it is important that we get a message through to our young people that we want them to realise that no matter what

they may be feeling, no matter what they have or haven't done, no matter what the situation, there are people who do care about them and will help them find a way through their difficulties. There are many agencies, many help lines and many individuals all willing to help. Clergy of all denominations often make themselves available 24 hours a day for people to contact in emergencies, on a confidential basis. We want them to know that we, as clergy, are not there to condemn thoughts or actions. We want to make ourselves available for people to consult, to talk through issues and to guide and direct, whether those issues are family issues, social issues, relationship issues, sexual issues, financial issues, or school/university issues. We want our young people to know that we are available and willing to help. There is always another direction to take, but sometimes people need help in finding that direction – so my appeal to them is to please, please seek help.

## **2) Programme for Government**

We prepared a detailed response to the Programme for Government in Northern Ireland. Ten years on from the Good Friday Agreement much has changed but there is still much to change. The word 'decommissioning' haunted the political process for many years - this was in reference to arms and ammunition. However 'decommissioning' still haunts the political process in many ways today for there is an ever greater need for 'decommissioning' of mind sets. Hardened attitudes have started to thaw, but there is still a lot of 'ice'. The Good Friday Agreement paved the way for a 'Shared Future', whereby society as a whole would provide for the individual without discrimination, but there is very little mention in this document of this 'Shared Future' and least of all a budget for

it. Another confidence- building measure would be to achieve movement in dealing with the needs of victims of the Troubles who are barely mentioned in these documents. However we now have **The Victims' Commission Team**, and however troubled the start this team may be experiencing it is important the church has its voice heard, and to that end we have a meeting arranged with the team on a date in June.

The voice of many victims in our church needs to be heard!

In the **South, the Legislation and Politics (RI) Sub-Committee** also continue to monitor the Programme for Government and have made a valuable contribution on the Constitutional Amendment on Children.

**Its equivalent committee** in the North is examining the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, and is in constant contact with the political parties.

3) **The Social Justice and Theological (RI) Group** published a book, *Embracing Difference*, and is intended as a resource for parishes who wish to approach the 'New Irish' in their midst. Next year, they plan to produce a pastoral reflection on the Church of Ireland and the Travelling Community.

4) **The Medical Ethics, Science and Technology Sub-Committee** are closely watching the progress of the Human Fertilization and Embryology Bill through the House of Commons, and also the guidelines on the termination of pregnancy in Northern Ireland.

- 5) **The European Affairs Working Group** are endeavouring to enable members of the Church of Ireland to identify the major issues raised by the Lisbon Treaty, to encourage informed discussion within the Church and to approach these tasks in an ecumenical manner.
  
- 6) **The Ecological and Environment Sub-Committee** has continued and will continue to encourage good ecological and environmental practice at parish level. The development of an Environmental Policy for central and Church offices has further progressed in the past year and is now nearing completion.

The above is only a 'snap shot' of the many hours devoted to the broad work of this committee. This is one of those committee with very few members, but a committee that draws in the expertise and experience of the parishioners in the pew to help formulate and report on issues prevalent in our society.

**We are grateful to many who have helped us over this past year and I propose the adoption of this detailed report and welcome debate on it.**